

The Missouri Charter Public School Commission and the Role of Sponsorship

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Introduction

For over twenty years, charter schools have been creating models for American public education and helping develop the practices that work best with 21st Century students. Through an exchange of tough accountability for significantly increased autonomy, thousands of high-performing charter schools across the United States are offering outstanding educations to more than one million students.

Missouri was the 34th state to authorize the creation of charter schools. Charter school legislation in Missouri was initially passed, in 1998, to address concerns with education within the State's two largest urban areas. Thus, the Missouri General Assembly passed legislation in 1998 permitting the establishment of charter schools in a metropolitan school district, or in an urban school district containing a city with a population greater than 350,000 inhabitants. The following were allowed to sponsor charter schools under this legislation: the school boards of Kansas City and St. Louis City Schools; a public four-year college or university with an approved teacher education program that meets regional or national standards of accreditation; or a community college located in Kansas City or St. Louis. Effective July 1, 2006, a private four-year college or university in a city not within a county with an enrollment of at least 1,000 students and with an approved teacher education program became eligible to sponsor a charter school.

In 2012 the Missouri General Assembly Legislative passed additional legislation bringing changes to the Missouri Charter School Statutes improving the accountability requirements of charter schools and sponsors. Key points of the legislative changes included:

- Requiring performance contracts between sponsors and schools;
 - Changing the appeals process from a judicial review to the Missouri State Board of Education;
 - Increasing public reporting requirements on student achievement, financial health and operational procedures;
 - Requiring parent grievance process, closure procedures and plans for special education in the charter;
 - Pre- approval of new sponsors by the State Board of Education;
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- Instituting a required evaluation of sponsors by the State Board based on standards of sponsorship every three years;



- Removing the disincentive for State Board to revoke sponsorship rights by having schools in a sponsor’s portfolio move to the Missouri Charter Public School Commission for sponsorship rather than the State Board;
- Removing the geographic restriction on charter schools allowing schools to open in new markets across the state:
 - In any school district that has been declared unaccredited by the State Board.
 - In any school district that has been declared provisionally accredited by the State Board.
 - In any school district accredited without provisions, sponsored only by the local school board.
- Expanding private university sponsorship to Kansas City;
- Expanding sponsorship to two- year vocational or technical schools

The Missouri General Assembly, in 2012, also established, in Statute, the Missouri Charter Public School Commission. The language placed into Statute was as follows:

“The ‘Missouri Charter Public School Commission’ is hereby created with the authority to sponsor high quality charter schools throughout the state of Missouri (160.525.1)”. The Statute also states, “the commission may approve proposed charters for its sponsorship under sections 160.400 to 160.425 and shall comply with all of the requirements applicable to sponsors under sections 160.400 to 160.425 (160.425.16)”.

The Missouri Charter Public School Commission

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Additional Statutory language was included defining the process for Commissioner appointments, logistics, and funding:

- The commission shall consist of nine members appointed by the governor, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate.
- No more than five of the members shall be of the same political party.
- No more than two members shall be from the same congressional district.
- The term of office of each member shall be four years, except those of the members first appointed, of which three shall be appointed for a term of one year, two for a term of two years, two for a term of three years, and two for a term of four years.
- At the expiration of the term of each member, the governor, by and with the advice and consent of the senate, shall appoint a successor.
- The appointees to the commission shall be selected as follows:
 - One member selected by the governor from a slate of three recommended by the commissioner of education;
 - One member selected by the governor from a slate of three recommended by the commissioner of higher education;
 - One member selected by the governor from a slate of three recommended by the president pro tempore of the senate;
 - One member selected by the governor from a slate of three recommended by the Speaker of the House of Representatives; and
 - Five additional members appointed by the governor, one of whom shall be selected from a slate of three nominees recommended by the Missouri School Boards Association.
- The commission shall annually elect a chairperson and vice chairperson, who shall act as chairperson in his or her absence. The commission shall meet at the call of the chairperson. The chairperson may call meetings at such times as he or she deems advisable and shall call a meeting when requested to do so by three or more members of the commission.
- Members of the commission are not eligible to receive compensation.
- Commission is to exercise sponsorship over charters approved by the commission under sections 160.400 to 160.425, including receipt of 1.5% sponsorship funding.
- The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education shall provide start-up funding for the commission to operate. The commission shall reimburse the department's costs from any funds



it receives as sponsor. DESE response to fiscal note request says that Commission start up funds will cost them \$300,000 in year one and \$100,000 each year in years two and three.

- The commission is authorized to receive and expend gifts, grants, and donations of any kind from any public or private entity.

In 2013 the Missouri General Assembly approved a line item in the State's annual budget of \$300,000 for Commission funding.

In October 2014 Missouri Governor Jay Nixon appointed the first six Commissioners. Each Commissioner will need to be ratified by the Missouri Senate before their appointment becomes official. Governor Nixon appointed:

- **Dr. Deborah Curtis** – University of Central Missouri Provost-Chief Learning Officer
- **Kent Farnsworth** - President Emeritus of Crowder College
- **Alicia Herald** - President of myEDmatch
- **Senator Delbert Scott** - Former Missouri State Representative and Senator
- **Peggy Lea Taylor** - Past President of the Missouri School Boards Association
- **Dr. John A. Wright Sr.** – Past Interim Superintendent of St. Louis Public Schools and the Normandy School District

Charter Schools in Missouri

Charter schools in Missouri are independent public schools. They may not charge tuition and are free and open to all residents within their political subdivision. Charter schools are required by law to accept and to meet the needs of special needs children and may not have admission requirements. Enrollment is limited only by capacity (Missouri Revised Statutes, 160.410).

Charter schools provide communities and parents:

- **More high-quality schools** giving every student the opportunity to achieve at a high-level.
 - Charter schools are some of the top performing schools in the country.
 - A higher percentage of charter school students are accepted into a college or university.
- **Innovative schools** where the autonomy allows the charter school to implement and evaluate innovative approaches for instruction, curriculum, school leadership and governance, budgeting, and other areas. Other educational institutions can learn from these experiences and incorporate successful initiatives into district practice, university studies, community initiatives.
- **Smaller schools** that can be more responsive and create an environment tailored to the needs of individual students, while still being held accountable for student learning
 - Charter schools are allowed the freedom to be more innovative while being held accountable for advancing student achievement.
- **Schools where parents are partners.**
 - Charter schools create an environment in which parents can be more involved, teachers are given the freedom to innovate, and students are provided the structure they need to learn.
- **Options.**
 - Charter schools offer parents another public school option.
 - Charter schools give parents the opportunity to choose a public school based on their child's needs.

At the same time, charter schools offer a built-in feedback mechanism. If the expectations of students and parents are not met, they can choose to leave the school and return to a district public school or another available educational option. Successful charter schools frequently have waiting lists of students wishing to attend. Choice becomes a barometer for consumer satisfaction and a way to learn what is working and meeting the needs of today's families.

Some additional 'benefits' of the charter school model include:

- **Mission-driven schools are productive and efficient:** Charter schools gain a remarkable level of teacher buy-in and engagement driven by a shared school-level mission. In well-working charter schools, this has led to gains in productivity and efficiency over regular district schools. Since many teachers join charter schools specifically because of their mission, charter school often can attract highly qualified teachers and dedicated staff. School-based budgeting brings care in the spending of limited resources and productivity from the ability to fund school priorities and needs quickly.

Traditional school structures often have a hard time focusing their strongest teaching assets on the students who need them the most. The strong mission-focus of charter schools can mean the most to poor performing students. Charter schools put high-energy professionals – people dedicated to moving low performing students forward -- into team structures and teacher-empowered work environments and the results can be astoundingly positive.

- **Charter schools can spur local economic development:** Charter schools can spur millions of dollars in economic growth for communities. Performance results have shown that charter schools can produce higher than average attendance and graduation rates, higher overall standardized test scores, and higher college admission rates than traditional public schools.
- **Charter schools can leverage community resources:** Charter schools can help tap into enormous available community resources not previously engaged in the local education mission. Across the country colleges and universities are helping many local school districts reach their educational goals through chartering. Community groups concerned with development, and social service agencies working with youth, are two community resources that can be put to productive use by districts open to chartering. In some towns, high-resource groups like foundations, banks, and law firms have played active roles in starting schools. Districts can turn critics into partners and realize considerable financial and in-kind assistance with carefully designed charter programs.

Successful charter schools have also been started by innovative groups of teachers, local education leaders, businesses, and community organizations. Not all schools need to start from scratch. Many charter schools have been based upon proven national models or managed by established charter professionals. Sponsors can contract with such professionals to provide support to chartering activities. Non-profit charter management organizations (CMOs) or for-profit educational management organizations (EMOs) offer proven school designs, and a menu of other support services. In Missouri, educational management organizations must work under a fully empowered local non-profit board of directors.

- **Charter schools can turn around low-performing schools:** Spurred by accountability systems to “restructure” schools, many education leaders are seeking new ways to create success for children attending schools where too many have failed for far too long.

In Missouri charter schools operate under a performance contract aligned with the initial charter application. The application review process and the charter application are both considered “key to shaping the instruction and operation of charter schools”. Charter schools are held accountable for their academic performance. Although required to operate in compliance with all State and Federal laws, as well as align their curriculum with Missouri’s State Standards, charter schools in Missouri have autonomy from many of the requirements mandated for public schools. The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) do not by Statute provide supervision of the charter schools. This oversight responsibility was assigned to the role of a sponsor (Missouri Revised Statutes, 160.400). DESE, however, is by statute required to evaluate each of the school sponsors.



Charter agreements in Missouri are currently five years in length with local sponsors. Charter applications that are denied by any sponsor may be submitted to the Missouri State Board of Education for appeal. If the state board approves the application, it will serve as the sponsor (Missouri Revised Statutes, 160.405).

The growth of Missouri charter schools expanded from the original 15 operating in the Kansas City School District during the initial authorization year (1999-2000) to 25 in the 2004-05 school year. However, that number dropped to 22 in 2006-07, 16 in Kansas City and 6 in St. Louis. In 2014 there are currently 50 charter schools open with 26 in Kansas City and 24 in St. Louis.

Authorizing and Sponsorship

In the State of Missouri there is one Authorizer, the Missouri State Board of Education. In Statute the authority to approve new charter applications, provide oversight and monitoring, as well as determine an existing charter schools application for renewal is given to Sponsors. The following entities are authorized to Sponsor (160.400):

- **The local school board** or a sponsor who has met the standards of accountability and performance as determined by the department based on sections 160.400 to 160.425 and section 167.349 and properly promulgated rules of the department;
- **A school district that has been accredited without provisions**, sponsored only by the local school board; provided that no board with a current year enrollment of one thousand five hundred fifty students or greater shall permit more than thirty-five percent of its student enrollment to enroll in charter schools sponsored by the local board under the authority of this subdivision, except that this restriction shall not apply to any school district that subsequently becomes eligible under subdivision* (3) or (4) of this subsection or to any district accredited without provisions that sponsors charter schools prior to having a current year student enrollment of one thousand five hundred fifty students or greater.
- The school board of the district in any district which is sponsoring a charter school as of August 27, 2012, as permitted under subdivision (1) or (2) of subsection 2 of this section, the special administrative board of a metropolitan school district during any time in which powers granted to the district's board of education are vested in a special administrative board, or if the state board of education appoints a special administrative board to retain the authority granted to the board of education of an urban school district containing most or all of a city with a population greater than three hundred fifty thousand inhabitants, the special administrative board of such school district;
- **A public four-year college or university** with an approved teacher education program that meets regional or national standards of accreditation;
- **A community college**, the service area of which encompasses some portion of the district;
- **Any private four-year college or university** with an enrollment of at least one thousand students, with its primary campus in Missouri, and with an approved teacher preparation program;
- **Any two-year private vocational or technical school** designated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, as amended, which is a member of the North Central Association and accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, with its primary campus in Missouri; or
- **The Missouri charter public school commission** created in section 160.425.

As the State's Authorizer, it is the responsibility of the Missouri State Board of Education (via the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) to provide oversight of Sponsors. This is clarified in 160.400 stating,

- The department shall provide guidance to sponsors in developing such policies and procedures;
- A sponsor shall provide timely submission to the state board of education of all data necessary to demonstrate that the sponsor is in material compliance with all requirements of sections 160.400 to 160.425 and section 167.349;
- The state board of education shall ensure each sponsor is in compliance with all requirements under sections 160.400 to 160.425 and 167.349 for each charter school sponsored by any sponsor;
- The state board shall notify each sponsor of the standards for sponsorship of charter schools, delineating both what is mandated by statute and what best practices dictate;
- The state board shall evaluate sponsors to determine compliance with these standards every three years. The evaluation shall include a sponsor's policies and procedures in the areas of charter application approval; required charter agreement terms and content; sponsor performance evaluation and compliance monitoring; and charter renewal, intervention, and revocation decisions. Nothing shall preclude the department from undertaking an evaluation at any time for cause;
- If the department determines that a sponsor is in material noncompliance with its sponsorship duties, the sponsor shall be notified and given reasonable time for remediation. If remediation does not address the compliance issues identified by the department, the commissioner of education shall conduct a public hearing and thereafter provide notice to the charter sponsor of corrective action that will be recommended to the state board of education. Corrective action by the department may include withholding the sponsor's funding and suspending the sponsor's authority to sponsor a school that it currently sponsors or to sponsor any additional school until the sponsor is reauthorized by the state board of education under section 160.403;
- The charter sponsor may, within thirty days of receipt of the notice of the commissioner's recommendation, provide a written statement and other documentation to show cause as to why that action should not be taken. Final determination of corrective action shall be determined by the state board of education based upon a review of the documentation submitted to the department and the charter sponsor;
- If the state board removes the authority to sponsor a currently operating charter school under any provision of law, the Missouri charter public school commission shall become the sponsor of the school.

A Sponsor shall develop the policies and procedures for:

- The review of a charter school proposal including an application that provides sufficient information for rigorous evaluation of the proposed charter and provides clear documentation that the education program and academic program are aligned with the state standards and grade-level expectations, and provides clear documentation of effective governance and management structures, and a sustainable operational plan;
- The granting of a charter;
- The performance framework that the sponsor will use to evaluate the performance of charter schools;
- The sponsor's intervention, renewal, and revocation policies, including the conditions under which the charter sponsor may intervene in the operation of the charter school, along with actions and consequences that may ensue, and the conditions for renewal of the charter at the end of the term, consistent with subsections 8 and 9 of section 160.405;
- Additional criteria that the sponsor will use for ongoing oversight of the charter; and
- Procedures to be implemented if a charter school should close, consistent with the provisions of subdivision (15) of subsection 1 of section 160.405.

Charter School Sponsor Standards

In February 2013 the Missouri State Board of Education adopted into Rule the following Standards for Charter School Sponsorship:

Standard 1 – Sponsor Commitment and Capacity

The sponsor recognizes that chartering is a means to foster excellent schools that meet identified needs, creates organizational structures to facilitate meeting these needs, and commits human and financial resources necessary to conduct its sponsoring duties effectively and efficiently. The sponsor shall implement steps to closely monitor the following:

- Provides capacity to serve as a sponsor by employing, contracting for services, or seeking expertise in other ways to ensure capacity to carry out all sponsoring activities essential to charter school oversight (including, but not limited to education leadership, curriculum, instruction, assessment, special education, federal programs, performance accountability, law, finance, and nonprofit governance);
- Maintains capacity for intervention purposes when charter sponsors have two (2) or more persistently low achieving charter schools, as verified by their Annual Performance Report (APR), before expanding their charter portfolio.

Standard 2 – Application Process and Decision Making

A quality sponsor implements a thorough application process that includes clear application and guidance; follows fair, transparent procedures and rigorous criteria; and grants only those charter applications that demonstrate a strong capacity to establish and operate a quality charter school.

The sponsor shall implement the following:

- Produces a thorough charter application process as outlined in section 160.400.11(2), RSMo, including the items as stated in section 160.405.1(1) – (17), RSMo;
- Maintains consistent criteria for accepting, approving, and denying charter applications and does so in accordance with a clearly established timeline;
- Requires the charter applicant to provide evidence of accountability regarding stable fiscal and organizational performance included in the charter application process, including:
 - Budget assumptions with balanced budgets; and
 - Positive cash flow reserve funds;
- Includes additional contractual provisions that verify rigorous, independent contract oversight by the charter governing board and the school's financial independence from the external provider (for any school contracting with a third-party provider for education design and operation or management);

Standard 3 – Board Support

The sponsor shall implement steps to offer ongoing support, including but not limited to: training, organization, ethical conduct, knowledge, commitment, compliance, leadership oversight, contract management, accountability, transparency, and the interpretation of the Missouri public charter school statutes/rules for charter school board(s). The sponsor shall:

- Ensure charter board members have adequate training to fulfill their position;
- Place charter schools on probation, and/or revoke or non-renew a school's charter for poor

governance if the charter school board does not follow statutory requirements, correct violations of statutory requirements, or continue to repeat the same violations, including, but not limited to the following:

- The charter board retains status as a Missouri non-profit corporation as outlined in section 160.400.7, RSMo;
- Charter board members submit ethics commission paperwork annually as outlined in sections 105.483 and 105.492, RSMo;
- Charter boards have policies in place to prevent conflict of interests with the charter school as outlined in section 160.400.15, RSMo; and
- All charter board members have criminal background and FCSR checks as outlined in section 160.400.14, RSMo;
- Demonstrate oversight of charter boards in a variety of ways, including but not limited to reviewing board minutes, attending board meetings, and verifying reporting processes; and
- Monitor whether charter school board and committee business is conducted as outlined in the Missouri Sunshine Laws, sections 610.010-610.030, RSMo.

Standard 4 – Academic Performance

The sponsor shall take steps to closely monitor state performance standards defined by the department are included in the sponsor/charter contract. The sponsor:

- Ensures that performance contracts are aligned to the pupil academic standards adopted by the State Board of Education as outlined in section 160.405.4(6)(a), RSMo;
- Establishes clear procedures and consequences for failure to meet requirements and outcomes set in the sponsor/charter contract; and,
- Does not approve additional sites or expansion of grade levels for a charter school identified as persistently low achieving, as verified by its APR.

Standard 5 – Fiscal Management

The sponsor shall implement steps to closely monitor the charter school performance management and financial actions that support a solvent fiscal status, including:

- A charter school identified as financially stressed develops a budget and education plan as outlined in section 160.417.3, RSMo. The department may withhold any payment of financial aid due to the charter school until such time as the charter school and sponsor have fully complied as outlined in section 160.417.5, RSMo;
- Ensures that adequate financial controls are in place to assure that revenue received for operation of the charter school are expended for expenses related to the operation of the charter school:
 - A requirement that a monthly check register is reviewed and approved by the local board prior to issuing payment for amounts in excess of \$1,000; and
 - The bank account where state funds are deposited must be established and under the control of the charter board. If a management company is contracted, personnel associated with the company shall not have direct access;
- Closely monitors that charter schools show fiscal management of federal grant programs in accordance with terms outlined in *Fiscal Guidance for Federal Grant Programs*;
- Closely monitors that charter schools have a procurement process in place as required by the



Code of Federal Regulations 34 CFR 80.36;

- Closely monitors that the Annual Secretary of the Board Report (ASBR) and the annual audit are submitted to the department in the time frame outlined by Missouri statutes and that these documents are not compiled by the same auditing service. The department may withhold any payment of financial aid due to the charter school until such time as the charter school and sponsor have fully complied as outlined in section 160.415.5, RSMo;
- Closely monitors that the annual audit summary is published as outlined in section 165.121.5, RSMo; and
- Closely monitors that charter schools utilize the coding procedures prescribed in the *Missouri Financial Accounting Manual* as outlined in section 160.405.1 (10), RSMo.

Standard 6 – Reporting

The sponsor shall implement steps to closely monitor all reports/data required by Missouri and federal law are completed and submitted in a timely manner for the department and/or legislature. The sponsor shall closely monitor the following:

Standard 7 – Oversight and Evaluation

The sponsor conducts oversight and evaluates performance for both federal and state compliance. The sponsor shall implement steps to closely monitor the following:

- Non-discrimination as required by federal and state laws;
- The compliance with all state and federal statutes and guidelines, including but not limited to: special education; all title programs; vocational/career education; food service; and services for foster, homeless, migrant, and English language learner students;

Standard 8 – Intervention, Renewal, Revocation, and Closure Decision Making

The sponsor shall implement steps to closely monitor transparent and rigorous processes that use comprehensive academic, financial, and operational management data to make decisions about intervention, renewal, revocation, and closure. The sponsor shall implement the following:

- Develops and maintains policies that have been adopted for the following areas:
- Bases the renewal process and renewal decisions on thorough analyses of a comprehensive body of objective evidence defined by the performance framework in the charter contract. Sponsors grant renewal only to schools that have achieved the standards and targets stated in the charter contract, are organizationally and fiscally viable, and have been diligent to the terms of the contract and applicable law.

The National Association of Charter School Authorizers has also developed standards for authorizers and sponsors. These standards can be reviewed at the following link:

http://www.qualitycharters.org/assets/files/images/stories/publications/Principles.Standards.2012_publication.pdf

The Road to Sponsorship

Becoming a charter school sponsor may seem like a daunting task. Fortunately, future sponsors have a tremendous advantage – the trials, errors and innovations of the past decade. The following section breaks down the decision-making process, some of the most important steps in sponsoring, and resources available to prospective sponsors.

Know Your Reasons

If planned carefully, the funding can work. The question is what is to be gained? The first step a sponsor should take is clearly defining why a school is being chartered, and what the chartering body hopes to accomplish. There are a number of reasons why a group decides to charter. These might include:

- Reducing class sizes in existing schools,
- Offering parental choice,
- Bringing in certain successful educational models,
- Addressing target populations, like students who are academically challenged or drop-out recovery, and
- Expanding the district's quality portfolio.

Whatever the reasons are for chartering, they must be well thought out, clearly understood, and communicated broadly to both internal audiences and to the local community and potential charter applicants.

Once the reasons for chartering are clearly laid out, the capacity of the organization to be an effective sponsor must be examined. Allowing a charter school to operate with a higher level of autonomy, while at the same time providing support and appropriate oversight, requires a skilled sponsor. Fortunately, new sponsors can borrow from the lessons learned by successful sponsors across the country. In addition, a charter program can draw upon the resources of local and national organizations dedicated to promoting quality charters such as the Missouri Public Charter School Association (MPCSA) and the National Association of Charter School Authorizers (NACSA).

Establish Your Agency Capacity and Infrastructure

Experience has shown that quality sponsors create organizational structures that clearly define lines of authority to protect the sponsorship function from conflicts of interest and political influence. By setting up these structures, the integrity of the process can be protected while creating an even playing field for all applicants to be judged on the quality of their charter school proposal. Recommended steps include:

- **Enlist skilled leaders and give them authority**
Good sponsors enlist skilled leaders to implement the sponsorship functions. This leadership can come from organizational staff, or rely on a combination of staff and contracted professionals, or assistance from other educational agencies working collaboratively. The key is determining how the chartering function will be performed internally and to ensure that all the parties involved understand their role. Prospective sponsors must dedicate sufficient staff with good knowledge of charter schools and the role of the sponsor.

- Will the organization have a **dedicated staff person** assigned to the authorizing duties? It is recommended that a full-time staff person work solely on chartering. Beyond the application process and annual oversight, the sponsor staff can support the new schools by finding and aligning resources and services, seek and engage outside funders, provide facilities and expansion support and undertake public relations for the program and the new schools.
- How will **other departments within the organization** like finance and legal participate in charter sponsorship? These departments are crucial and should be briefed on the chartering program at its inception, and they should be given ample opportunities to have their questions addressed. The organization's leader support for charter schools and sponsorship as a strategic tool must be made clear, and the importance of these functions assisting sponsor staff should be communicated.
- Organizations must also spell out what kinds of **decisions** will be brought to the sponsor's governing board (i.e. new charters, renewals), and what kinds of authority will be vested in the staff (i.e. negotiating a contract with a school, placing schools on probation). Smart sponsors do not burden the board with minor issues or invite political interference with processes that should be based only on a rigorous review of data or established best practices in authorizing.

Fund the Authorizing Function

Another key is properly funding the sponsorship function. While charter schools have proven a cost-effective model of education, the best sponsors develop a budget for the sponsorship function and do not cut corners in funding the process. Charter school success requires a strong sponsor fully playing their ongoing role in oversight and accountability. Before jumping into chartering, a sponsorship body must put the infrastructure in place to succeed as an sponsor and to support the schools that they charter.

Ensure a Fair Application Process

A quality sponsor implements a comprehensive application process that follows fair procedures and rigorous criteria. It grants charters only to those developers who demonstrate strong capacity for establishing and operating a quality school. Establishing an easily understandable charter application process that treats all fairly is essential. A model application is available on the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education website at <http://dese.mo.gov/quality-schools/charter-schools/resources>

An initial request for proposals should:

1. Communicate the potential chartering opportunities,
2. Explain the application process,
3. Describe how decisions will be made, and
4. Be clear in stating submission and decision timelines.

Beyond this and ensuring the application meets all of the required state criteria, a sponsor should clearly communicate any other expectations for content and format, and explain how each stage of the application process will be evaluated. A good application process is free of surprises and defines very clearly what potential applicants will need to do to meet the requirements. Additional criteria aligned to

the goals of the sponsor is encouraged. For example, if the goal is to create certain type of school, the application should specifically call for those things. The possibilities are endless.

Decide the Level of Detail.

Although the Missouri law does include specific application requirements it does not outline exactly how much information is needed in the applicant group's plan as reflected in the application. Extensive and detailed planning is needed for a start-up charter school to succeed and it must be reflected in the application document for the sponsor to have sufficient understanding of the organization's level of preparation and capacity. For example, a law may call for "financial documentation," but a smart sponsor should ask for a five-year budget projection for the term of the charter and the group should be able to defend those projections under questioning. There is no better way to estimate the viability of a school than to have a smart budget manager question an applicant group about their assumptions and how they would respond to changed circumstances. Other areas that may need expanded detail should be noted, such as the level of support to be provided to limited English-proficient students or students with IEPs needing special education services.

Employ Rigorous Criteria for Charter Decisions

Quality sponsors create a thorough application and review process to insure that applicants have the capacity to carry out what they propose. Sponsors need to determine what information they expect applicants to provide to support their claims. At a minimum, applicants should be required to provide a clear and compelling mission, a quality educational program, a solid financial plan, effective governance and management structures, and evidence of their team's ability to perform.

Sponsors must also develop a process for evaluating that information and rigorous standards spelling out exactly how those criteria are met. A sponsor then conducts a thorough evaluation of the applications using reviewers with educational, organizational, legal, and financial expertise. Only applicants that have met the established criteria should be granted a charter. Political or organizational connections should never be allowed to dominate this decision. It is important to document the factors that determined a decision about each application for defense of any appeals from losing applicants. Once a decision is made, applicants are promptly notified and informed of their rights and responsibilities.

It is also crucial to determine and communicate pre-opening requirements so that applicants understand what will be expected of them if they are granted a charter. Sponsors then must make a separate decision, after the granting of a charter, about a school's readiness to open. This should be accomplished on a careful timeline that protects families from sudden changes.

All of these guidelines are consistent with the understanding that sponsoring a charter applicant is much like entering into a business relationship. The capacities and expectations of each partner must be well understood in advance to avoid misunderstandings or the failure of the partnership. When charter schools fail, the students pay the highest price, so diligence before granting a charter is critical.

Finally, as it is the responsibility of the sponsor to bring a charter application forward to the Missouri State Board of Education for review and approval they must ensure that the application is fully

compliant with Missouri and Federal law. The State Board has the obligation to approve charter applications only if they are in compliance with State and Federal law.

Tips for the Evaluation of Applications

- Conduct information sessions and workshops prior to application deadline, allowing groups to ask any and all questions. Provide time and chance for groups to network at these meetings. Such sessions also allow the district to get to know interested groups and informally judge the quality of applicants.
- Include a face-to-face interview, with prepared questioners willing to push and prod applicants.
- Have prepared questions and ask tough follow-up questions.
- Ask groups where they have seen a model similar to theirs work with the kind of children they propose to educate in your district. Visit or research that school.
- Undertake detailed reference checking of applicant group committee members, and proposed school administrators or directors.
- Require resumes of proposed charter board members and have staff do extremely rigorous reviews of the resume claims.
- Send board questionnaires to see if board members understand time and stewardship commitments of board membership.
- Due diligence – Conduct Google searches on individuals and groups; call other sponsors to learn if the same group has applied elsewhere and findings.
- Diversity -- Beware of boards of directors of all educators or all business people.
- Call proposed board members and ask them to speak on the phone about the main elements in the application. If they cannot, be skeptical of the group.
- Be concerned if no board members attend the application interview. It may indicate weak oversight.

Create a Contract for Performance

The principle document governing the relationship between a sponsor and a charter is the performance contract. It is the ultimate basis for determining the success or failure of the charter school partnership. Since the initial term of a charter in Missouri is five years, the contract should start with expectations for what will be accomplished in that period of time.

The charter school's governing board is the entity the sponsor contracts with to govern, operate and manage the school. The board must see that the school maintains strong communication with the sponsor on matters of compliance and reporting related to the contract. Usually the school director or principal builds the relationship with the sponsoring staff. It is a relationship that starts in the application period and it should grow to be a responsive and respectful one. It is crucial to the success of the school and to getting the information the larger school board needs to understand the charter's goals and performance.

A quality sponsor negotiates a performance contract with a charter school operator that clearly articulates the rights and responsibilities of each party regarding school autonomy, expected outcomes, measures for evaluating success or failure, performance consequences and other material terms. This is

a key negotiation that communicates expectations and rights for the term of the charter and through mutual agreement over terms sets a tone for the quality of the relationship.

An effective performance contract clearly lays out the boundaries of a charter school's autonomy. It defines the school's rights related to the educational program, control of funds, and school management decisions. It also enumerates waivers from traditional public school laws and district regulations.

Given that level of autonomy, the sponsor can demand from the school clear, measurable and attainable student achievement, along with organizational, financial, and governing performance goals. The contract should articulate rigorous performance indicators and specific standards relative to each of the stated goals. These goals form the basis for how the sponsor will evaluate the school on an ongoing basis and make a renewal decision at the end of the contract term.

Both the process for evaluation and consequences for poor performance must be spelled out in the performance contract.

The types of data to be reviewed, the conducting of evaluations, the process of reporting and the frequency of reviews must be covered. In the event that the charter school does not meet mutually agreed performance goals, there must be a process for sponsor intervention in the school's operations. The most severe consequence would be revoking the school's charter or declining to renew a charter.

With such high stakes, it is important to be certain that the performance contract stipulates clear performance goals and anticipates the consequences when they are not met.

Provide Ongoing Oversight and Evaluation

Sponsors walk a tightrope between their governmental role of monitoring compliance – both legally mandated and those that are essential to fulfilling its public oversight role – and protecting and respecting the autonomy over day-to-day operations resting with the charter school.

Great sponsors are equally vigilant about both aspects of chartering. Matters like health and safety in the school, protecting the rights of special education students, and fairness in discipline procedures demand a firm hand and effective oversight procedures. Yet sponsor offices can sometimes overstep and try to manage the school from their offices or through promulgating its own rules. Sponsors must be clear that they will respect autonomy for its charters, and judge the school at the end of its contract based on its results with learners. Charters are about reviewing outputs, not regulating inputs.

Renewal Decision-Making

In Missouri charter contracts last five years. Starting in year four (or even three), a rigorous process should be set in motion for charter renewal. Many charter school operators find a well-run renewal can serve as a rededication and a powerful learning process. The data set to be weighed should be comprehensive and clear, parent and public input should be solicited and the process should have criteria for renewal that are fully understood by the leaders of the school. Charter schools gain renewal if they meet three standards - They are effectively managing a quality educational program that is meeting the goals and measures detailed in its contract; the school is organizationally and financially



viable, and, the organization has been faithful to the broader goals of its charter, the contract and applicable law.

Closing

Public charter schools have become an increasingly significant part of the public school landscape, providing quality educational options for parents and students in hundreds of communities. 1 in 20 student's now attends a public charter school. There are more than 2.5 million students enrolled in nearly 6,500 public charter schools across the U.S., and demand has never been higher; over one million student names are on waiting lists to attend a public charter school. Nationally, more than half of the students served by charter public schools are eligible for free or reduced priced lunch, more than 50 percent are students of color, and 17 percent are Limited English Proficient – these are all higher percentages than traditional public schools' demographics.

Since 2010, 15 independent studies have found that students attending charter schools do better academically than their traditional school peers and all but one independent research study has found that students in charter schools do better in school than their traditional school peers.

With the opportunity to operate a charter public school comes the obligation to provide an option that isn't just different but is one of quality. With the opportunity to sponsor the obligation of diligent oversight and decision making in the best interest of children is critical.

In Missouri, the 2014 Annual Performance Reports (APR) and Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) results conducted annually for all district and charter public schools as a sample measure of the schools' success brought positive results regarding charter school performance.

Consider the following data points,

- In the State of Missouri, the majority of charter public schools scored over 70% on their APR performance standards which equates to being considered accredited, an increase from 68% in 2013;
- The percentage of students scoring at a level of proficient or advanced in English Language Arts increased;
- The percentage of students scoring at a level of proficient or advanced in Mathematics decreased by less than 4% in a year when the State has indicated that there was an overall decline in scores statewide.

Specifically, in Kansas City,

- Seventeen charter public schools scored over 70% on their APR;
- Fifteen charter public schools exceeded the local school district average in English Language Arts,
- Fifteen charter public schools exceeded the local school district average in Math;
- Three charter public schools exceeded the Missouri state average in English Language Arts;
- Four charter public schools exceeded the Missouri state average in Math.

Specifically, in St. Louis,

- Fifteen charter public schools scored over 70% on their APR;
- Fourteen charter public schools exceeded the local school district average in English Language Arts;
- Eleven charter public schools exceeded the local school district average in Math;
- Three charter public school exceeded the Missouri state average in English Language Arts;
- Three charter public school exceeded the Missouri state average in Math;

The data is clear, charter public schools continue to trend in the right direction demonstrating growth and academic success over time. Given that the majority of students enrolling in charter public schools enter one to two years below grade level the significant growth the charter public schools are making moving students out of the bottom performance levels toward proficiency is noteworthy.